

Dear Friends:

This year the state Legislature approved several bills important to senior citizens: We passed some new laws to improve seniors' health care, but we didn't make as much progress as I had hoped on property tax relief or consumer protection. This special legislative report explains how the new laws will affect you. I'd also like to bring you up to date on the many senior-friendly bills that didn't pass this year, but that I will continue to support on your behalf.

I hope you find this information useful. If you have any questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to contact me. Remember, I'm here to help you as well as represent you, so please continue to keep in touch.

Sincerely,


State Rep. Mark Schoesler

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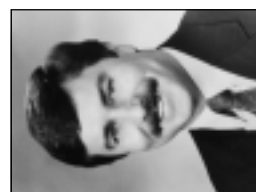
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Legislative Report to Senior Citizens

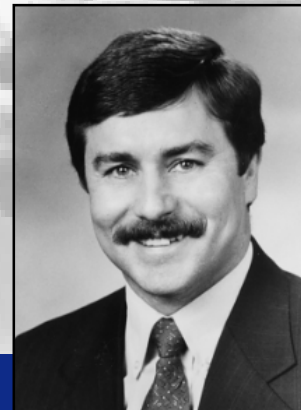
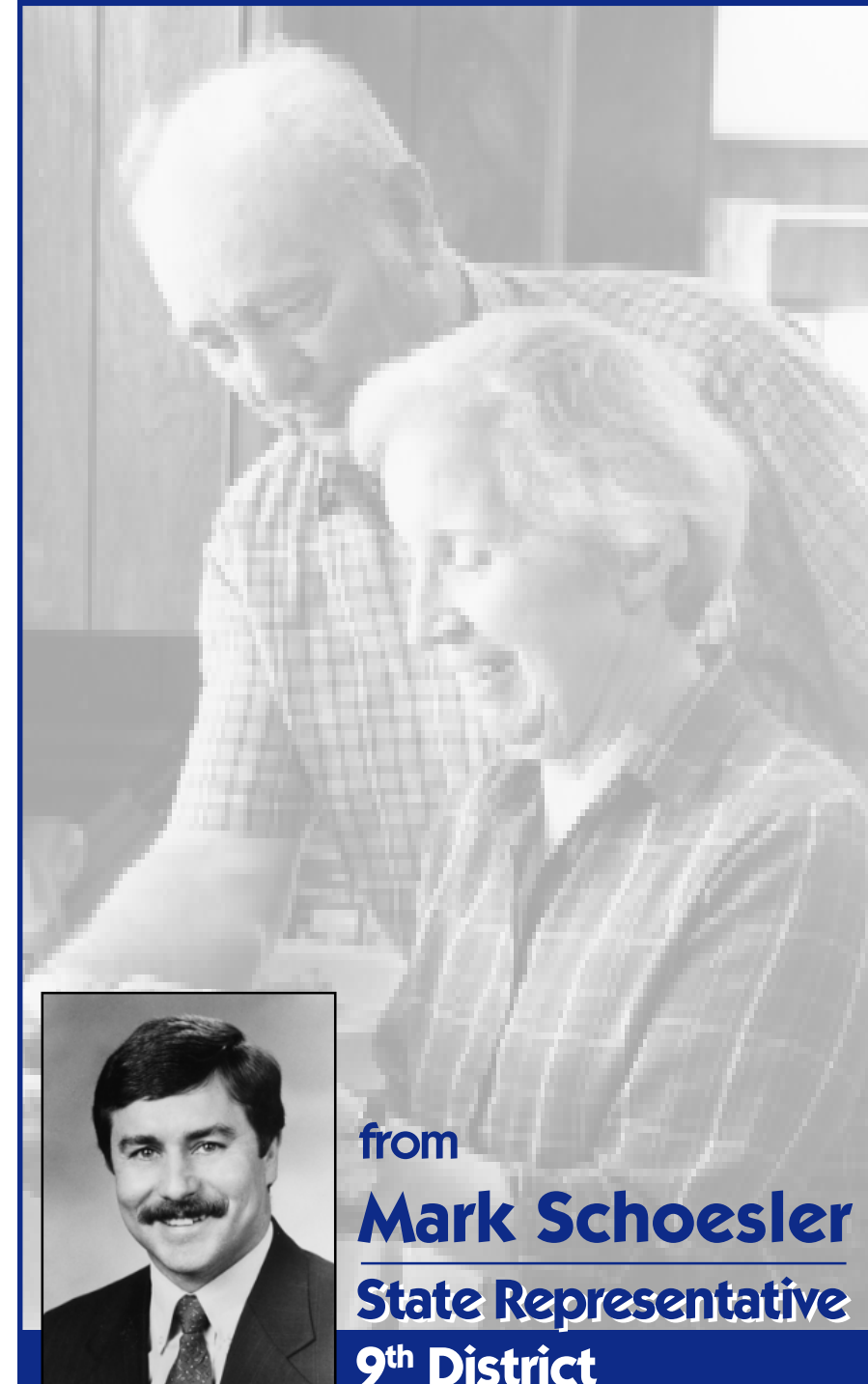
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**How will new laws
affect you?**

Legislative Report to Senior Citizens



from
Mark Schoesler
State Representative
9th District

Health care

From talking to seniors in the 9th District, I know that health care is a big concern. The 1999 Legislature took steps to improve the quality and availability of care, especially long-term care. People over 85 need long-term care services the most, and their population is expected to double in the next 10 years. So our health-care system must keep up with the changing needs of our seniors.

Here's a summary of what the Legislature did this year to make sure seniors receive quality care:

- **Giving seniors better access to supplemental insurance**

Medicare clients have two options for their health coverage: They can choose Medicare "Part A" — which offers catastrophic coverage — and also buy supplemental Medicare insurance (known as "Medigap") for services such as prescription drugs and hospitalization. Or they can purchase a Medicare managed care plan. Unfortunately, problems in the insurance market have led some health plans to stop offering coverage. A glitch in current law has made it difficult for seniors who lose their managed care plans to purchase Medigap policies that are similar to their previous plans and meet their health needs. A new law we passed allows clients to purchase a Medigap policy of their choice if they lose their current managed care health plan.

- **Improving the quality of in-home care services**

Another new law improves oversight of in-home care providers. It requires Department of Social and Health Services case managers to keep track of the care each client receives, and to share information with the client's doctor and provider. The department can terminate contracts if a provider is not performing well or is jeopardizing the health, safety or well-being of its clients.

- **Protecting vulnerable adults**

Over the past several years, the Legislature has taken steps to protect vulnerable adults who need long-term care. The law we passed this year creates a single definition of "vulnerable adult" so the laws already in place are easier to enforce.

Republicans also proposed **eliminating the sales tax on all over-the-counter medications**, but that plan was ignored by House and Senate Democrats. Senior citizens and economically disadvantaged families would have benefitted a great deal from this tax cut. I'm sorry it didn't pass, and I hope we can approve a similar tax cut next year.

Overall, we've made progress on senior health care but there's always more to be done. Right now Washington's health insurance market needs serious help. More and more people are losing access to quality, affordable care as insurance companies leave the market. Our health-care policy is on the wrong track — it over-regulates the health insurance market, and raises costs for consumers. Next year I'll work hard to improve the quality and affordability of care for seniors and all Washingtonians.

Senior issues in the budget

The two-year budget we passed earlier this year increases funding for a variety of senior health care services. You should know that I voted against the final version of the budget because it spends far too close to the spending limit, and doesn't give tax relief to Washingtonians. I did support another version of the budget that included money for seniors, health care, education, and many other services, but that spent taxpayer dollars more responsibly and included tax cuts.

I'm very happy, however, with the way we funded senior programs. Here's a summary:

- **Aging and Adult Services** - 10.4 percent increase
- **Volunteer services** - 25 percent increase
- **Aging and Adult case management** - the ratio of case managers to clients is reduced from one for every 100 to one for every 85
- **In-home care workers** - Wage increase of 50 cents an hour this year and 50 cents an hour next year
- **Community residential providers** - To keep up with increases in boarding home license fees, we gave a two-percent yearly increase to medical providers, and allocated about \$2 million to make up for the minimum wage hike.
- **Nursing homes** - We provided \$41.6 million for nursing homes, and gave most facilities an increase of about two percent a year.



Property taxes

As property taxes rise, seniors are especially hard-hit because many of them are on fixed incomes. You may find yourself wondering how much longer you'll be able to afford the property taxes on your home. This year, unfortunately, we were only able to pass one property tax relief bill for seniors: it exempts low-income senior housing from property taxes.

Republicans pushed other bills that would have given tax relief to all seniors, but those bills were rejected or ignored. For example, one bill I supported would have allowed seniors to deduct the cost of health insurance premiums from their income when determining whether they qualify for an exemption or deferral program. Another bill would have capped assessment increases on seniors' homes at 2 percent a year. Although major property tax cuts didn't pass this year, I'll continue to support them.



Consumer protection

Another missed opportunity this year was protecting seniors from fraudulent telephone practices. The House passed, but the Senate didn't approve, a bill cracking down on predatory phone companies.

Last year more than 36,000 Washingtonians were "slammed," which is the common phrase for switching a customer's long distance phone carrier without permission. Another problem is "cramming," the practice of adding services to a customer's account without permission.

The bill I supported would have increased penalties for companies that make unauthorized changes in phone services. Customers would not have been liable for charges in the first 30 days following the switch, or for any charges associated with restoring their original service. The bill would also have required phone companies to get written permission for service changes for any customer over the age of 65.

Passing consumer protection laws for seniors will be one of my top priorities in the next session.

Rep. Mark Schoesler

9th District